Daytime show gets prime treatment

By KEN HEINRICH
Miami News Amusements—TV Editor

There's evidence that network television is responding to an appeal from critics to upgrade daytime programming — especially during the after-school hours.

ABC, for example, dipped into the prime-time area for talent to produce a historical drama for its second, afternoon school special.

It's called, "Follow the North Star," an original story of the pre-Civil War Underground Railroad by Alvin Boretz. He's a seasoned writer who's done all sorts of prime-time work.

His live-action drama focuses on a young Pennsylvania boy who decides, despite the Fugitive Slave Law, to risk his life to free a young Maryland slave.

Channel 10 will air the special at 4:30 p.m. Nov. 1.

In chatting with Boretz, I learned his story is not necessarily geared for the preteenager and teenager.

"It's an adventure story, of course," he said. "But I was also looking for something that a full family audience could take away with them.

"Adventure is the easy part. What I was trying to do was show the relationship of a white boy and a black boy from the first encounter. The young black, at first, distrusts the Northern boy's offer of aid, but that changes gradually and a close relationship develops.

"I suppose you could relate such a situation to today," Boretz added.

ABC must have liked his idea. It required some budget money to get him to write it in the first place, then to film it at Black Creek Pioneer Village, north of Toronto, Canada, a location filled with the mood of the 1800's.

It also decided to background it with original music, which was dubbed in just last week.

Boretz, a Peabody award winner, is understandably proud of the effort.

"Maybe it will help counteract the flack TV has been getting about daytime programming. I think we have a program which, first, is dramatic in content, and second, of historical interest."

He said the young stars of "Follow the North Star" are Chris Valentine as the Northern boy, and Dennis Hines as the slave, Eric Till directed it, and Harve Sherman produced it.

As for Boretz, he remains one of the few, very busy, TV writers still functioning from New York City. ("I only go to Hollywood when I absolutely have to.")

His credits include material for the CBS Children's Playhouse and such standards as "Medical Center." He's currently at work on a pilot for ABC.

The refreshing thing about Boretz is his attitude. Here's a guy who can make it anywhere, yet he was willing to jump over into one of TV's troubled areas and help out.

Beautiful.

1001 N.E. 20th Avenue N.M. 949-8321